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# Fourth-Grade Students' Perceptions of Their Teacher as a Writer

by Danielle DeFauw



Danielle DeFauw



Twenty-three students watched their fourth-grade teacher model the writing tasks she expected them to complete. She wrote two leads—dialogue and setting-the-scene—as the students suggested details. I wondered how these students viewed their teacher as a teacher-writer and how she influenced their writing.

This particularistic and comparative case study (Merriam, 1998) explores these questions. Specifically, the observations revolve around a particular yet common classroom situation: the teacher models writing tasks, thus acting as a teacher-writer (Cremin & Baker, 2010). Although writing teachers may be effective even if they do not choose to be writers for personal reasons (Brooks, 2007; Robbins, 1996), the comparisons of the six students highlighted in this article demonstrate the importance of their teacher, Mrs. Taylor (pseudonym), modeling her own writing for instructional purposes and acting as a teacher-writer.

## Theoretical Framework

This study centers upon Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which posits that learners acquire deeper understanding through observation first, followed by experience. Students observe and learn from their teacher-writer's modeling (Graves, 1983; Locke, 2015) and develop writing self-efficacy, perceiving themselves as capable in writing, which motivates them to write (Pajares & Valiante, 2006).

## Teacher-Writer

There is an intricate connection between a teacher's role as an instructor and a teacher's choice to be a writer (Andrews, 2008). "The 'Teachers as Writers' movement...[contends] that when teachers

embrace the identity of writer, their practices as teachers of writing undergo a transformation that enhances the experience of writing and the writing performance of their students" (Locke, 2015, n.p.). Teacher-writers choose to reflect on their writing as they write (Cremin & Myhill, 2012), a stance the National Writing Project (NWP) encourages of its participants (Andrews, 2008). The NWP teachers' frequent writing and presentation practices in- and outside-of-school benefit their students' writing development (Whyte, Lazarte, Thompson, Ellis, Muse, & Talbot, 2007).

However, many teachers do not consider themselves teacher-writers, even if they write outside of school (Robbins, 1996). They feel they are effective writing teachers without using their personal writing, yet they do model writing tasks students need to complete (Brooks, 2007). Regardless of whether teachers view themselves as writers, it is possible that students may view their teachers as teacher-writers due to their modeling.

## Modeling

Teachers model writing in various ways. They demonstrate writing (Cremin & Baker, 2010) in front of their students using a document camera, overhead, chart paper, or their writer's notebooks (Graves, 1983). Through modeling of the recursive writing process (Locke, 2015), students witness

their teacher's messy struggles with writer's craft (Cremin & Myhill, 2012). Whether or not the teacher identifies as a teacher-writer, students are often inspired by their teacher to live as writers (Graves, 1983). Asking students how they viewed their teacher as a writer, and how their teacher influenced them as writers, was an imperative for this case study.

## Method

### Participants, Context, Procedures

Six European-American students attending a Title I, suburban, K-4 elementary school in the North Central region were selected for this case study as a typical sample (Merriam, 1998) of boy/girl pairs at low, average, and high levels. I determined these levels based on formative assessments and students' state standardized writing assessment performance levels (not proficient, partially proficient, or proficient); I ranked students as high achieving (H), average (A), or low achieving (L) in writing. The fourth-grade students who participated included: Sam (H), Christina (H), Alexandra (A), Derek (A), Nicholas (L), and Madison (L) (pseudonyms). This case study took place at the school where I worked as a third-grade teacher, and I taught three of the participating students in my class the previous year.

Mrs. Taylor had 10 years of teaching experience in the same building in first and fourth grades, and although she did not consider herself a teacher-writer, she modeled writing consistently for her students. She used a writing workshop framework, providing students free choice within units of study. Mrs. Taylor accepted my request to observe how she used her writing to teach her students. I conducted five 45- to 75-minute observations of Mrs. Taylor's writing instruction during the last week of the "memory," or narrative, unit of study.

During my time observing in Mrs. Taylor's classroom, her students elicited limited participation from me, understanding my primary role as observer. I detached myself as much as possible

to make my observations, while also remaining friendly to students who initiated interactions. Minimally, I acted as a participant-observer (Yin, 1994), although the term familiar impartial observer describes my role more accurately.

### Data Sources

Data sources included seven transcribed interviews (six students and one teacher), classroom observations, and documents.

- I conducted focused interviews including a dozen semi-structured questions the Monday following the fifth classroom observation.
- I observed Mrs. Taylor's writing instruction 5 times and audio-recorded, transcribed, and wrote field notes during and immediately following each observation (Merriam, 1998).
- I collected documents, including the students' and teacher's written memory piece drafts and instructional resources.

### Data Analysis

I used two rounds of coding, including descriptive and pattern coding, to identify natural categories (Saldaña, 2013). First I created a computer document of all transcribed interview and classroom observation data. I then reread the data in conjunction with the field notes and documents numerous times to descriptively code the data. Next I isolated each piece of coded data, attaching the data to index cards. Using pattern coding, I sorted the index cards into the following categories:

- **Definitions:** Students identified their teacher as a teacher-writer: "I wouldn't say that she's a professional writer ... but yeah she likes to write."
- **Influences:** Students provided suggestions for how their teacher had been shaped as a teacher-writer: "She would have taken writing classes."

- **Strategies:** The teacher explicitly taught and expected students to use writer's craft: "Those are ways ... you can write to say how somebody is talking.... They whine.... yell.... cry."
- **Mentor texts:** The teacher referred to her own, a student's, or a published author's writing as evidence of a specific writing strategy: "Notice and name what the author did in this piece."

To ensure the categories' accuracy, I conducted a peer debriefing with an outside researcher (Merriam, 1998) who had no connection to this study. Provided the categories and descriptions, she matched pre-selected data excerpts with the category she deemed appropriate. The coding matched for 91% of data excerpts. Discussion followed in order to clarify the *Strategies* and *Mentor Texts* categories. The district rubric supported this conversation to highlight how I evaluated and counted students' effective use of modeled strategies.

## Findings

A key assertion of this study is that although teachers do not need to identify themselves as teacher-writers nor write outside of school to teach writing well, it is important for teachers to model writing for their students. This leads students to perceive them as teacher-writers, which can influence and inspire students to write. In this section I will detail the following: (a) classroom observations, (b) documents and interviews, and (c) data supporting each category (e.g., definitions, influences, strategies, and mentor texts).

### Classroom Tasks and Observations

Mrs. Taylor implemented a four-week narrative, or memory, unit of study. Using the classroom's routine writing workshop structure, she conducted daily mini lessons per students' needs in which she modeled her own writing process for students (Locke, 2015). For example, to support idea generation, Mrs. Taylor and the students followed several steps in their writing process (Andrews, 2008).

They placed sticky notes with memories on a map they drew of their school. To support planning and drafting, they used graphic organizers to show how they "exploded the moment" (Lane, 1993). They also created wordlists to describe the five senses, main event, and setting. Such tasks were completed prior to the study's observations.

Based on formative assessments from writing conferences conducted the previous week (Anderson, 2000), Mrs. Taylor determined students needed to add more details to their writing. Therefore, during the first observation, Mrs. Taylor modeled a five-minute freewrite on an overhead based on a previous draft to generate more ideas. As she wrote about a memory of her son's bedtime routine (detailed in the mentor texts category), she remembered additional dialogue from the event, so she added dialogue from the freewrite into the draft. She then asked the students to identify areas she needed to revise dialogue. Students' responses allowed for a teachable moment concerning "small talk," which she described as "dialogue...that does not move a story forward." Students improved their suggestions for revision from small talk to effective dialogue.

For the second lesson, students worked on a different draft of Mrs. Taylor's writing from a previous lesson, similarly identifying small talk and revising for effective dialogue. Reading aloud, she described the day she used a long-division rap to teach her students. Students made suggestions to improve the dialogue, which Mrs. Taylor recorded on the draft.

For the third lesson, Mrs. Taylor used her long-division-rap writing to teach students the differences between dialogue and thoughtshots. Lane (1993) defines thoughtshots as the author's "reflections, thoughts, feelings, and opinions" (p. 44). Mrs. Taylor marked thoughtshots with sticky notes depicting drawn clouds (See Figure 1). Then, the students underlined, marked, or revised Mrs. Taylor's writing in purple and green to identify or add both effective dialogue and thoughtshots.

For the fourth and fifth lessons, students named the leads and endings, respectively, of mentor texts that Mrs. Taylor pulled from a bin of their classroom's touchstone texts (Sturgell, 2008). They identified leads as either dialogue or setting-the-scene. They identified endings as either lessons or emotions. Mrs. Taylor referred to the original lead in her long-division-rap narrative before writing two additional leads for this narrative. Similarly, she wrote two different endings after sharing her original lesson ending.

**Documents and Interviews**

At the end of each interview, I invited students to share drafts of their own writing. Examples of Mrs. Taylor's modeling were evident in their drafts (See Tables 1 & 2); especially salient were students' revision strategies. Although Sam stated during his interview, "We haven't edited or revised.... We've just written it and figured out what ideas to put inside...a rough draft," Sam had made revisions. He scribbled out six sections, used carats to insert text, and rewrote three leads. Christina also revised her

Table 1  
Students' Use of their Teachers' Modeled Writing Strategies

Student	Dialogue	Details	Word Choice	Thoughtshots
Christina (H)	+	/	+	-
Sam (H)	-	+	/	0
Alexandra (A)	/	+	-	-
Derek (A)	-	+	-	-
Madison (L)	-	+	-	-
Nicholas (L)	-	-	+	0

*Note.* The number of times students used each writing strategy was designated as + = thorough, > 5; / = minimal, 3-5; - = limited, 1-2.

Table 2  
Excerpts of Teacher's and Students' Drafts

	Dialogue	Details	Word Choice	Thoughtshots
Mrs. Taylor	"Please do the following problems on your whiteboards," I announced to the class.... "Do we have to keep doing this?" the students whined.... "I don't get it," many of them chimed.... "Quiet down. I think I have something that may help you with this."	The sun shined through the window as I stood in front of 23 blank faces.... Rap noises came out of my mouth.... Some of the students reluctantly joined me, while others let their embarrassment lead them.... I could see many students secretly mouthing the rap as they worked through the problems.... As I graded the students' tests, I knew... the memories of the division rap and... my rapping would forever be engraved in their minds.	frantically screaming referred concept spotted disbelief despite embarrassment	I needed a plan... thinking about all the different things that I could do to help my students understand division.... I was excited to share my new rap.
Christina (H)	People were yelling, "Hurry up!" pushing and shoving others. Not two people were not arguing and screaming.	She put vinegar and baking soda in a vase and the combination bubbled.... My mind twists and turns with confusion and every time I walk out the door the confusion of the bottle rocket comes back.	exploded rushed	I thought it was amazing.
Sam (H)	"Bus buddies..." started the speaker as I darted out the door snatching my stuff.... She said, "Sam, your bus buddies are trouble!"	Wearing his orange and black Spiderman hat.... Wiping the sweat from my forehead... responsibility filled my mood as I realized what my mom went through when I was little."	intoxicating responsibility snatching rushing	None
Alexandra (A)	"Hey," I yelled... "Wait up!" "Okay," they said.	When I sat on [the] table, [the teacher] announced the rules. I was so nervous her rules went through one ear and out the other.	announced	I thought I was getting a boy bus buddy.
Derek (A)	C'mon time for school time for school son it's 5:30 your bus comes at 8:05... so let me sleep ok... The leader yelled at us to go down the slide to let the other kids in... Time for recess I yelled... I asked if I could play and he said, yes.	I walked to the bounce house as a squirt of water hit my chest with great force... When I turned around I saw who did it. It was my gym teacher!	evacuated	I wondered who did it.

Table 2 Continued  
Excerpts of Teacher's and Students' Drafts

	Dialogue	Details	Word Choice	Thoughtshots
Madison (L)	<p>"Oh, Mr. S, you look good dressed like a girl."                      "Thanks, Madison," <u>Mr. G.</u> replied sarcastically....                      "Where is your dress?" the kids shouted.                      "In my gym bag," <u>Mr. G.</u> replied.                      "What dress are you wearing tomorrow?" a big kid asked.  <u>Mr. G.</u> said, "I'm not wearing a dress and I'm never going to make a bet again!"</p>	<p>It was a sunny Monday morning. We were getting off the buses. All of a sudden, the kids stopped in their tracks and stared. We couldn't believe what <u>Mr. G.</u> was wearing!...The kids burst out laughing including me. He was wearing a purple dress...[that] looked like a big diamond because of the blaze of the sun shining down on him.</p>	<p>piled burst blaze rumor whispered tripped</p>	<p>What is he wearing? I thought to myself.</p>
Nicholas (L)	None	<p>I began playing and after awhile the game of tag turned into a game of chase....I ran so fast I leaned too far forward and tripped on a medium-sized rock.</p>	<p>raced strided [sic] tick tock protected spun 180 degrees asphalt surrounded realized</p>	None

leads. She stated, "My favorite part in this story is my beginning.... This is setting-the-scene.... This is dialogue....I think this one was a lot better than the last two I did....I gave a little more detail,...and I said it was a breezy summer day in this one...and the daisies were dancing with the grass." She also scribbled out certain words, added thoughtshots, and used stars to show where she wanted additional writing inserted from the last page.

Madison's draft showed the next highest frequency level of revision strategies. She color coded her writing, used an asterisk to insert a new paragraph, used carats to insert thoughtshots, and scribbled out writing. Similarly, Derek wrote text in the margins and used arrows to direct insertions (See Figure 2 Derek's Revisions). He color coded his writing, underlined numerous parts of text, and scribbled out writing. Alexandra color-coded sections of her writing, and used stars,

hearts, circles, and squares to insert writing from the last page (See Figure 3 Alexandra's Revisions). After Nicholas read his writing aloud he stated, "I realized a place I need to change a few pages.... It's right here I skidded on my back...hitting my head on the ground.... I just take out these."

### Definitions

Students defined their teacher as a writer. When asked, "Is your teacher a writer?" students responded affirmatively. However, Mrs. Taylor reported that she solely wrote at school during lesson planning or instruction. When asked, "How often do you think she writes at home?" students responded as follows:

- Christina: "I would say she was [a writer] because she writes pretty good stories... and...I don't think somebody could just leave that in their memory forever.... I'm

pretty sure she [writes at home] because she'll bring to school all these stories."

- Derek: "She always tells us that she writes at home about us and her family."
- Nicholas: "I know she does....whenever she has a chance."

### Influences

Through the interviews, each student stated that Mrs. Taylor was influenced by or learned from her teachers, parents, or friends, much like themselves. Students also commented on how they influenced Mrs. Taylor's writing. Christina stated, "All of her students...write so much and she says we write very well and...I think we influence her, too." Madison added, "She...look[s] up to...her students like if they have really nice writing." Additionally, students affirmed that Mrs. Taylor's writing influenced them as writers.

In response to my questions about why teachers write and about how their teacher's writing influenced them, all six students shared ways in which Mrs. Taylor's writing influenced them or was useful for teaching students to improve their writing:

- Christina: "Well I think it's helped me because she knows so much about writing that she can teach it to us and that'll help us get our writing improved."
- Alexandra: "At the beginning of the year my...stories...were not as good but now when [I] get to the end of the year all of [my] stories [are] really good."
- Madison: "If she writes stories, I kind of look up to her and try to make my writings as good as her because they're funny."

When asked, "In general, how do you feel about your teacher as a writer?" students revealed other ways their teacher influenced them as writers, especially connecting to her topic choices:

- Sam: "She picks really good topics...it can be really funny and...she just puts

really good feeling into it.... She's writing about...just one little tiny thing."

- Madison: "I think I feel good because I think she can teach us a lot, cause she was a writer and I think she can teach us more."

### Strategies

Students noted and used various writing strategies that Mrs. Taylor explicitly modeled in her own writing, which included dialogue, details, word choice, and thoughtshots (Tables 1 & 2). Mrs. Taylor demonstrated numerous examples of using strong dialogue versus "small talk" to move her writing forward. Five out of six students in this study included dialogue in their memory pieces, although only two included strong dialogue that moved the story forward.

In addition to dialogue, Mrs. Taylor modeled using details throughout her writing. Christina commented on this, stating, "She gives good detail and you can really see what she's saying. She does need to revise and go back through [her] writing quite a few times...[and] looks at her details and sees if the detail really supports her story." Madison also noted Mrs. Taylor's use of details, stating, "It's not just a boring piece of writing.... She has good detail... and makes me feel like I'm there...I connect." All six students included details in their writing. Sam, Christina, Alexandra, and Derek wrote numerous details throughout their drafts, and Madison wrote a detailed lead. Nicholas also included details, although he used them in a more limited way.

Mrs. Taylor also demonstrated and discussed the importance of word choice throughout the lessons. Sam noted this, stating, "She likes to use like her words that she replaces all the other boring words with...I like how she does that." Derek added, "She kind of changes around words to make it sound better." Nicholas stated, "She puts herself in her story using big words and putting the reader... wherever the writing...take[s] place." Three of the students, including Sam, Madison, and Nicholas demonstrated effective word choice.



Finally, Mrs. Taylor included thoughtshots. Christina, Alexandra, Madison, and Derek each included thoughtshots in their writing. However, these thoughtshots seemed to need revision to represent internal dialogue versus statements of thoughts and feelings (Lane, 1993). This would be an area in which Mrs. Taylor could provide additional instruction and modeling to support students in strengthening their writing.

### **Mentor Texts**

Mentor texts are models of high-quality writing writers use as examples to read, study, and emulate (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2009). Mentor texts included the teacher referring to her own, a student's, or a published author's writing as evidence of specific writing strategies. For example, during one lesson, Mrs. Taylor referred to a student's writing stating, "This is a story called 'My Big Accident.' It's from a fourth grader last year. Right here's an example of how this author used [dialogue]." To teach students about thoughtshots, Mrs. Taylor referred to a published author, "When you look at [Barbara Park's] Junie B. Jones's books...to find some thoughtshots.... Junie B. Jones is always thinking to herself." In the following excerpt, Mrs. Taylor referred to her own writing as a way to write effective dialogue versus small talk:

*Every evening when bedtime arrives, Alex complains, "Can I stay up until 8:15?"*

*"No. Your bedtime is at 8:00," I replied.*

*"But we didn't have any time to cuddle. I promise that I will get up and take a shower in the morning. You won't even have to tell me twice," he whined.*

*"That is fine, Alex. But if you are crabby in the morning then you won't be able to stay up tomorrow night."*

*"Thanks, Mom. Can I have a snack, too?"*

### **Discussion**

This research suggests that regardless of whether or not teachers choose to identify themselves as teacher-writers, their students' perceptions of them as teacher-writers matter. Mrs. Taylor does not consider herself a teacher-writer, but she does provide modeled instruction using her own writing process (Ray, 2006) to support her students' writing development. Her students did not realize she wrote solely for the purpose of instruction. Mrs. Taylor knew it was imperative to write with her students (Andrews, 2008) in order to model her own writing process and personal topics as she completed the tasks she expected them to complete.

The students perceived Mrs. Taylor as a teacher-writer who positively influenced them. Christina stated, "I think she can teach us a lot because she was a writer, and I think she can teach us more throughout the school year." Derek stated, "We can look up to her and kind of follow what she writes." Nicholas stated, "I wish I could just get it like Mrs. Taylor's....When she writes really good it encourages [me] to try to get like that and write better."

Students learned from her modeled writing as evident from the strategies (details, dialogue, leads and endings, word choice, and thoughtshots) they included in their drafts (Tables 1 & 2), sometimes through revision. Although only four students demonstrated all of the writing strategies highlighted, learning writer's craft is a process and requires practice for all writers (Andrews, 2008; Locke, 2015). With practice, students can acquire and continue to improve their writing strategies in order to produce increasingly high-quality writing.

### **Implications for Teaching**

The data supports six interlinked implications (Locke, 2015) for teachers to consider as they seek to facilitate their students' writing development:

1. Model writing. Teachers should model their personal writing process with personal

- topics as they work toward a final product (Andrews, 2008; Ray, 2006). Witnessing a writer's recursive process provides examples for students to emulate as they observe their teachers wrestle with a writer's craft (Cremin & Myhill, 2012).
2. Act as a teacher-writer. Even teachers who do not choose to write for personal reasons appear to be writers to students when they model their own writing process for instructional purposes (Locke, 2015; Ray, 2006). Such an appearance enriches students' writing development as they try to write like their teachers (Cremin & Myhill, 2012).
  3. Teach writing strategies explicitly. The more teachers model writing, the more they experience the natural challenges writing creates. Thus, teachers have to struggle through writing as any writer does, using and adapting the strategies that (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2009) "more experienced writers use to write well" (Anderson, 2000, p. 9). Students imitate such strategies in their own writing.
  4. Teach students how to revise. "The trepidation...that students feel about revising their writing" (Heard, 2014, p. ix) is a commonality in writing communities (Cremin & Myhill, 2012). Students are often not taught how to revise (Heard, 2014). When teachers model their own writing process, such as deleting, adding, or changing dialogue, details, words, thoughtshots, leads, or endings, they provide students with concrete examples of how to revise their own writing (Heard, 2014; Lane, 1993).
  5. Use mentor texts. Any well-written text may be a mentor, or touchstone (Sturgell, 2008), text. Ray (2006) recommends aligning mentor texts to the genres studied within a unit of instruction. Although teachers may use published pieces, they may also create mentor texts through modeled writing. The examples teachers or students create can provide potential mentor texts that students may choose to replicate in their own writing.
  6. Motivate students to write. Through inter-linking all of these implications, students' motivation to write is supported. When teachers model writing strategies and use or create mentor texts for students to emulate, students are influenced, encouraged, and inspired to write like other authors—published authors, their peers, and their teachers—and this can have a positive impact on their self-efficacy (Pajares & Valiante, 2006).

### Limitations

One limitation for this study includes my personal bias (Yin, 1994) as a teacher-writer, which I believe influences my teaching positively. Second, I acted as the only direct observer for this study (Yin, 1994), focusing on Mrs. Taylor's teaching and not the six students' actions during the observations. Third, Mrs. Taylor knew me professionally and personally, and although she welcomed me, she may have felt nervous. My presence may have influenced her teaching. Since I was also a classroom teacher in the building, I may have influenced students' interview responses. Finally, this research cannot be generalized to the larger population, especially due to the few observations conducted. However, the results of this study, albeit small-scale, offer important details in understanding how students' perceptions of their teacher as a writer impact their writing development.

### Future Research

Through the data analysis, it was evident many students named writing strategies during the interview they did not use in their personal writing. It could be argued if a writer can name a strategy then s/he can potentially use the strategy. Mrs. Taylor chose to model myriad strategies, and it would be interesting to determine across an entire

school year when students begin to use specific writing strategies.

## Conclusion

This study revealed the benefits these six fourth-grade students reaped from their teacher modeling writing. They perceived her as a teacher-writer and strived to reflect her examples in their own writing. They respected her and often attempted to emulate her dialogue, details, word choice, thoughts, and revision. Although it is not necessary for a teacher to be a writer outside of school, as is the case with Mrs. Taylor, when teachers choose to model their writing process for their students, their influence, encouragement, and inspiration reach past the instruction provided to the very hearts of their student-writers.

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